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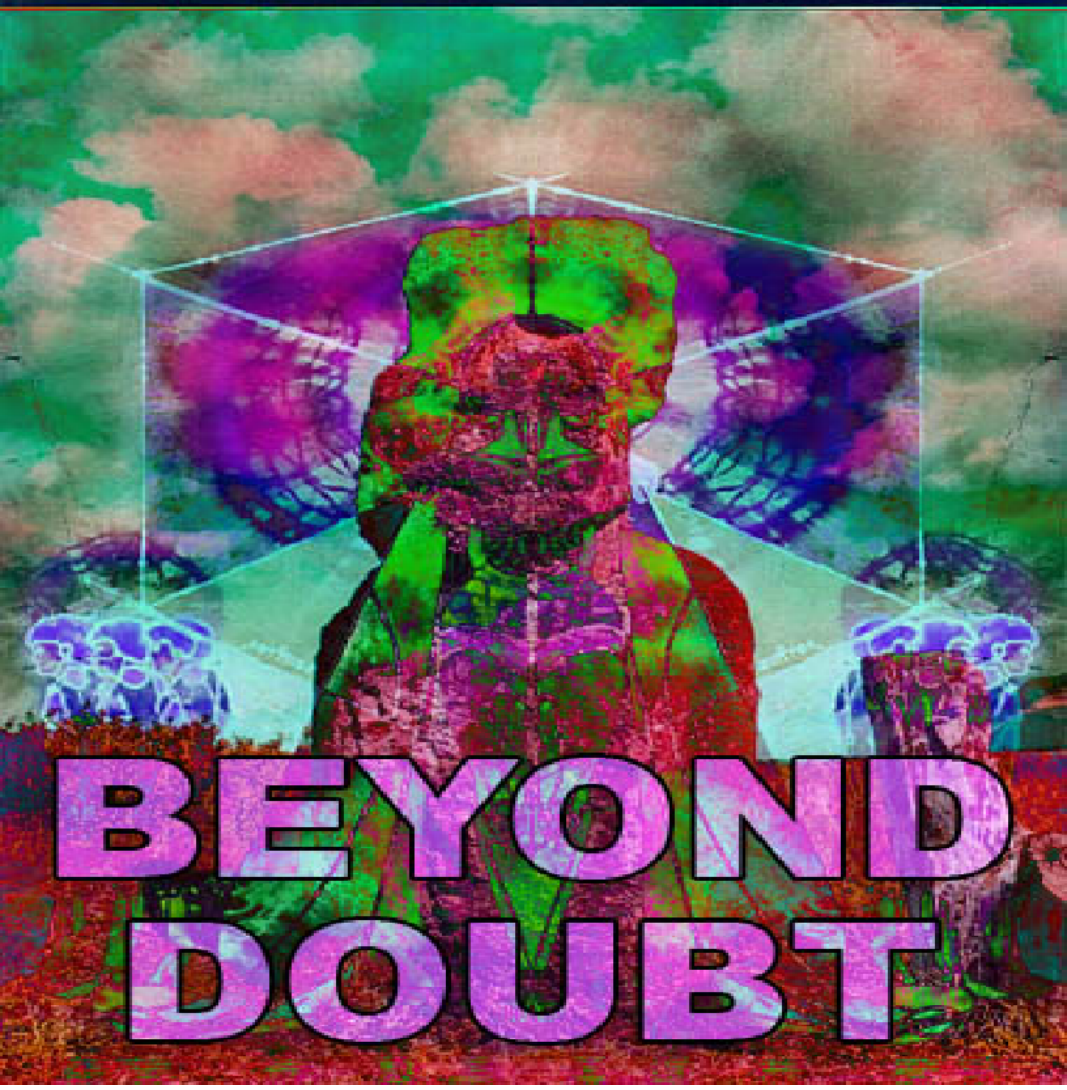

BEYOND DOUBT

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By Robert A. Heinlein

SAVANT SOLVES SECRET OF EASTER ISLAND IMAGES According to Professor J. Howard Erlenmeyer, Sc.D., Ph.D., F.R.S., director of the Archeological Society's Easter Island Expedition. Professor Erlenmeyer was quoted as saying, "There can no longer be any possible doubt as to the significance of the giant monolithic images which are found in Easter Island. When one considers the primary place held by religious matters in all primitive cultures, and compares the design of these images with artifacts used in the rites of present day Polynesian tribes, the conclusion is inescapable that these images have a deep esoteric religious significance. Beyond doubt, their large size, their grotesque exaggeration of human form, and the seemingly aimless, but actually systematic, distribution gives evidence of the use for which they were carved, to wit; the worship of. . . ."

WARM, and incredibly golden, the late afternoon sun flooded the white-and-green city of Nuria, gilding its maze of circular criss-crossed streets. The Towers of the Guardians, rising high above the lushly verdant hills gleamed like translucent ivory. The hum from the domed buildings of the business district was muted while merchants rested in the cool shade of luxuriant, moistly green trees, drank refreshing okrada, and gazed out at the great hook-prowed green-and-crimson ships riding at anchor in the harbor-ships from Hindos, from Cathay, and from the far-flung colonies of Atlantis.

In all the broad continent of Mu there was no city more richly beautiful than Muria, capital of the province of Lac.

But despite the smiling radiance of sun, and sea, and sky, there was an undercurrent of atmospheric tenseness -as though the air itself were a tight coil about to be sprung, as though a small spark would set off a cosmic explosion.

Through the city moved the sibilant whispering of a name-the name was everywhere, uttered in loathing and fear, or in high hope, according to the affiliations of the utterer-but in any mouth the name had the potency of thunder.

The name was Talus.

Talus, apostle of the common herd; Talus, on whose throbbing words hung the hopes of a million eager citizens; Talus, candidate for governor of the province of Lac.

In the heart of the tenement district, near the smelly waterfront, between a narrow side street and a garbage alley was the editorial office of Mu Regenerate, campaign organ of the Talus-for-Governor organization. The office was as quiet as the rest of Nuria, but with the quiet of a spent cyclone. The floor was littered with twisted scraps of parchment, overturned furniture, and empty beer flagons. Three young men were seated about a great, round, battered table in attitudes that spoke their gloom. One of them was staring cynically at an enormous poster which dominated one wall of the room. It was a portrait of a tall, majestic man with a long, curling white beard. He wore a green toga. One hand was raised in a gesture of benediction. Over the poster, under the crimson-and-purple of crossed Murian banners, was the legend:

TALUS FOR GOVERNOR!

The one who stared at the poster let go an unconscious sigh. One of his companions looked up from scratching at a sheet of parchment with a stubby stylus. "What's eating on you, Robar?"

THE one addressed waved a hand at the wall. "I was just looking at our white hope. Ain't he beautiful? Tell me, Dolph, how can anyone look so noble, and be so dumb?"

"God knows. It beats me."

"That's not quite fair, fellows," put in the third, "the old boy ain't really dumb; he's just unworldly. You've got to admit that the Plan is the most constructive piece of statesmanship this country has seen in a generation."

Robar turned weary eyes on him. "Sure. Sure. And he'd make a good governor, too. I won't dispute that; if I didn't think the Plan would work, would I be here, living from hand to mouth and breaking

my heart on this bloody campaign? Oh, he's noble all right. Sometimes he's so noble it gags me. What I mean is: Did you ever work for a candidate that was so bull-headed stupid about how to get votes and win an election?"

"Well . . . no."

"What gets me, Clevum," Robar went on, "is that he could be elected so easily. He's got everything; a good sound platform that you can stir people *up* with, the correct background, a grand way of speaking, and the most beautiful appearance that a candidate ever had. Compared with Old Bat Ears, he's a natural. It ought to be just one-two-three. But Bat Ears will be re-elected, sure as shootin'."

"I'm afraid you're right," mourned Clevum. "We're going to take such a shellacking as nobody ever saw. 1 thought for a while that we would make the grade, but now- Did you see what the *King's Men* said about him this morning?"

"That dirty little sheet- What was it?"

"Besides some nasty cracks about Atlantis gold, they accused him of planning to destroy the Murian home and defile the sanctity of Murian womanhood. They called upon every red-blooded one hundred per cent Murian to send this subversive monster back where he came from. Oh, it stank! But the yokels were eating it up."

"Sure they do. That's just what I mean. The governor's gang slings mud all the time, but if we sling any mud about governor Vortus, Talus throws a fit. His idea of a news story is a nifty little number about comparative statistics of farm taxes in the provinces of Mu . . . What are you drawing now, Dolph?"

"This." He held up a ghoulish caricature of Governor Vortus himself, with his long face, thin lips, and high brow, atop of which rested the tall crimson governor's cap. Enormous ears gave this sinister face the appearance of a vulture about to take flight. Beneath the cartoon was the simple caption:

BAT EARS FOR GOVERNOR

"There!" exclaimed Robar, "that's what this campaign needs.

Humor! If we could plaster that cartoon on the front page of *Mu Regenerate* and stick one under the door of every voter in the province, it 'ud be a landslide. One look at that mug and they'd laugh themselves sick-and vote for our boy Talus!"

HE held the sketch at arm's length and studied it, frown ing: Presently he locked up. "Listen, dopes- Why not do it? Give me one last edition with some guts in it. Are you game?"

Clevum looked worried. "Well ... I don't know . . . What are you going to use for money? Besides, even if Oric would crack loose from the dough, how would we get an edition of that size distributed that well? And even if we did get it done, it might boomerang on us-the opposition would have the time and money to answer it."

Robar looked disgusted. "That's what a guy gets for having ideas in this campaign-nothing but objections, objections!"

"Wait a minute, Robar," Dolph interposed. "Clevum's kicks have some sense to them, but maybe you got some thing. The idea is to make Joe Citizen laugh at Vortus, isn't it? Well, why not fix up some dodgers of my cartoon and hand 'em out at the polling places on election day?"

Robar drummed on the table as he considered this. "Umm, no, it wouldn't do. Vortus' goon squads would beat the hell out of our workers and highjack our literature."

"Well, then how about painting some big banners with old Bat Ears on them? We could stick them up near each polling place where the voters couldn't fail to see them."

"Same trouble. The goon squads would have them down before the polls open."

"Do you know what, fellows," put in Clevum, "what we need is something big enough to be seen and too solid for Governor's plug-uglies to wreck. Big stone statues about two stories high would be about right."

Robar looked more pained than ever. "Clevum, il you can't be helpful, why not keep quiet? Sure, statues would be fine-if we had forty years and ten million simoleons."

"Just think, Robar." Dolph jibed, with an irritating smile, "if your mother had entered you for the priesthood, you could integrate all the statues you want-no worry, no trouble, no expense."

"Yeah, wise guy, but in that case I wouldn't be in poli tics- Say!"

" 'S trouble?"

"Integration! Suppose we *could* integrate enough statues of old Picklepuss-"

"How?"

"Do you know Kondor?"

"The moth-eaten old duck that hangs around the Whirling Whale?"

"That's him. I'll bet he could do it!"

"That old stumblebum? Why, he's no adept; he's just a cheap unlicensed sorcerer. Reading palms in saloons and a little jackleg horoscopy is about all he's good for. He can't even mix a potent love philter. I know; I've tried him."

"Don't be too damn certain you know all about him. He got all tanked up one night and told me the story of his life. He used to be a priest back in Egypt."

"Then why isn't he now?"

"That's the point. He didn't get along with the high priest. One night he got drunk and integrated a statue of the high priest right where it would show up best and too big to be missed-only he stuck the head of the high priest on the body of an animal."

"Whew!"

"Naturally when he sobered up the next morning and saw what he had done all he could do was to run for it. He shipped on a freighter in the Red Sea and that's how come he's here."

Clevum's face had been growing longer and longer all during the discussion. He finally managed to get in an objection. "I don't suppose you two red hots have stopped to think about the penalty for unlawful use of priestly secrets?"

"Oh, shut up, Clevum. If we win the election, Talus'll square it. If we lose the election- Well, if we lose, Mu won't be big enough to hold us whether we pull this stunt or not."

ORIC was hard to convince. As a politician he was al ways affable; as campaign manager for Talus, and conse quently employer of Robar, Dolph, and Clevum, the boys had sometimes found him elusive, even though chummy.

"Ummm, well, I don't know-" He had said, "I'm afraid Talus wouldn't like it."

"Would he need to know until it's all done?"

"Now, boys, really, ah, you wouldn't want me to keep him in ignorance . . ."

"But Oric, you know perfectly well that we are going to lose unless we do something, and do it quick."

"Now, Robar, you are too pessimistic." Oric's pop eyes radiated synthetic confidence.

"How about that straw poll? We didn't look so good; we were losing two to one in the back country."

"Well . . . perhaps you are right, my boy." Oric laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "But suppose we do lose this election; Mu wasn't built in a day. And I want you to know that we appreciate the hard, unsparing work that you boys have done, regardless of the outcome. Talus won't forget it, and neither shall, uh, I ... It's young men like you three who give me confidence in the future of Mu-"

"We don't want appreciation; we want to win this election."

"Oh, to be sure! To be sure! So do we all-none more than myself. Uh-how much did you say this scheme of yours would cost?"

"The integration won't cost much. We can offer Kondor a contingent fee and cut him in on a spot of patron age. Mostly we'll need to keep him supplied with wine. The big item will be getting the statues to the polling places. We had planned on straight commercial apportation."

"Well, now, that will be expensive."

"Dolph called the temple and got a price-"

"Good heavens, you haven't told the priests what you plan to do?"

"No, sir. He just specified tonnage and distances."

"What was the bid?"

Robar told him. Oric looked as if his first born were being ravaged by wolves. "Out of the question, out of the question entirely," he protested.

But Robar pressed the matter. "Sure it's expensive- but it's not half as expensive as a campaign that is just good enough to lose. Besides-I know the priesthood isn't supposed to be political, but isn't it possible with your connections for you to find one who would do it on the side for a smaller price, or even on credit? It's a safe thing for him; if we go through with this we'll *win*-it's a cinch."

Oric looked really interested for the first time. "You might be right. Mmmm-yes." He fitted the tips of his fingers carefully together. "You boys go ahead with this. Get the statues made. Let me worry about the arrangements for apportation." He started to leave, a preoccupied look on his face.

"Just a minute," Robar called out, "we'll need some money to oil up old Kondor."

Oric paused. "Oh, yes, yes. How stupid of me." He pulled out three silver pieces and handed them to Robar. "Cash, and no records, eh?" He winked.

"While you're about it, sir," added Clevum, "how about my salary? My landlady's getting awful temperamental."

Oric seemed surprised. "Oh, haven't I paid you yet?" He fumbled at his robes. "You've been very patient; most patriotic. You know how it is-so many details on my mind, and some of our sponsors haven't been prompt about meeting their pledges." He handed Clevum one piece of silver. "See me the first of the week, my boy. Don't let me forget it." He hurried out.

THE three picked their way down the narrow crowded street, teeming with vendors, sailors, children, animals, while expertly dodging refuse of one kind or another, which was unceremoniously tossed from balconies. The Whirling Whale tavern was apparent by its ripe, gamey odor some little distance before one came to it. They found Kondor draped over the bar, trying as usual to cadge a drink from the seafaring patrons.

He accepted their invitation to drink with them with alacrity. Robar allowed several measures of beer to mellow the old man before he brought the conversation around to the subject. Kondor drew himself up with drunken dignity in answer to a direct question.

"Can I integrate simulacra? My son you are looking at the man who created the Sphinx." He hiccoughed politely.

"But can you still do it, here and now?" Robar pressed him, and added, "For a fee, of course."

Kondor glanced cautiously around. "Careful, my son. Some one might be listening . . . Do you want original integration, or simply re-integration?"

"What's the difference?"

Kondor rolled his eyes up, and inquired of the ceiling, "What do they teach in these modern schools? Full integration requires much power, for one must disturb the very heart of the aether itself; re-integration is simply a re-arrangement of the atoms in a predetermined pattern. If you want stone statues, any waste stone will do."

"Re-integration, I guess. Now here's the proposi tion-"

" THAT will be enough for the first run. Have the porters desist." Kondor turned away and buried his nose in a crumbling roll of parchment, his rheumy eyes scanning faded hieroglyphs. They were assembled in an abandoned gravel pit on the rear of a plantation belonging to Dolph's uncle. They had obtained the use of the pit without argument, for, as Robar had reasonably pointed out, if the old gentleman did not know that his land was being used for illicit purposes, he could not possibly have any objection.

Their numbers had been augmented by six red- skinned porters

from the Land of the Inca-porters who were not only strong and untiring but possessed the desirable virtue of speaking no Murian. The porters had filled the curious ventless hopper with grey gravel and waited impassively for more toil to do. Kondor put the parchment away somewhere in the folds of his disreputable robe, and removed from the same mysterious recesses a tiny instrument of polished silver.

"Your pattern, son."

Dolph produced a small waxen image, modeled from his cartoon of Bat Ears. Kondor placed it in front of him, and stared through the silver instrument at it. He was apparently satisfied with what he saw, for he commenced humming to himself in a tuneless monotone, his bald head weaving back and forth in time.

Some fifty lengths away, on a stone pedestal, a wraith took shape. First was an image carved of smoke. The smoke solidified, became translucent. It thickened, curdled. Kondor ceased his humming and surveyed his work. Thrice as high as a man stood an image of Bat Ears- good honest stone throughout. "Clevum, my son," he said, as he examined the statue, "will you be so good as to hand me that jug?" The gravel hopper was empty.

ORIC called on them two days before the election. Robar was disconcerted to find that he had brought with him a stranger who was led around through the dozens of rows of giant statues. Robar drew Oric to one side before he left, and asked in a whisper, "Who is this chap?"

Oric smiled reassuringly. "Oh, he's all right. Just one of the boys-a friend of mine."

"But can he be trusted? I don't remember seeing him around campaign headquarters."

"Oh, sure! By the way, you boys are to be congratulated on the job of work you've done here. Well, I must be running on- I'll drop in on you again."

"Just a minute, Oric. Are you all set on the apportation?"

"Oh, yes. Yes indeed. They'll all be distributed around to the polling places in plenty of time-every statue."

"When are you going to do it?"

"Why don't you let me worry about those details, Ro bar?"

"Well . . . you are the boss, but I still think I ought to know when to be ready for the apportation."

"Oh, well, if you feel that way, shall we say, ah, mid night before election day?"

"That's fine. We'll be ready."

ROBAR watched the approach of the midnight before election with a feeling of relief. Kondor's work was all complete, the ludicrous statues were lined up, row on row, two for every polling place in the province of Lac, and Kondor himself was busy getting reacquainted with the wine jug. He had almost sobered up during the sustained effort of creating the statues.

Robar gazed with satisfaction at the images. "I wish I could see the Governor's face when he first catches sight of one of these babies. Nobody could possibly mistake who they were. Dolph, you're a genius; I never saw anything sillier looking in my life."

"That's high praise, pal," Dolph answered. "Isn't it about time the priest was getting here? I'll feel easier when we see our little dollies flying through the air on their way to the polling places."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. Oric told me positively that the priest would be here in plenty of time. Besides, apportation is fast. Even the images intended for the back country and the far northern peninsula will get there in a few minutes-once he gets to work."

But as the night wore on it became increasingly evident that something was wrong. Robar returned from his thirteenth trip to the highway with a report of no one in sight on the road from the city.

"What'll we do?" Clevum asked.

"I don't know. Something's gone wrong; that's sure."

"Well, we've got to do something. Let's go back to the temple and try to locate him."

"We can't do that; we don't know what priest Oric hired. We'll

have to find Oric."

They left Kondor to guard the statues and hurried back into town. They found Oric just leaving campaign headquarters. With him was the visitor he had brought with him two days before. He seemed surprised to see them. "Hello, boys. Finished with the job so soon?"

"He never showed up," Robar panted.

"Never showed up? Well, imagine that! Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure; we were there!"

"Look," put in Dolph, "what is the name of the priest you hired to do this job? We want to go up to the temple and find him."

"His name? Oh, no, don't do that. You might cause all sorts of complications. I'll go to the temple myself."

"We'll go with you."

"That isn't necessary," he told them testily. "You go on back to the gravel pit, and be sure everything is ready."

"Good grief, Oric, everything has been ready for hours. Why not take Clevum along with you to show the priest the way?"

"I'll see to that. Now get along with you."

Reluctantly they did as they were ordered. They made the trip back in moody silence. As they approached their destination Clevum spoke up, "You know, fellows-"

"Well? Spill it."

"That fellow that was with Oric-wasn't he the guy he had out here, showing him around?"

"Yes; why?"

"I've been trying to place him. I remember now-1 saw him two weeks ago, coming out of Governor Vortus' campaign office."

AFTER a moment of stunned silence Robar said bitterly, "Sold out. There's no doubt about it; Oric has sold us out."

"Well, what do we do about it?"

"What can we do?"

"Blamed if I know."

"Wait a minute, fellows,'" came Clevum's pleading voice, "Kondor used to be a priest. Maybe he can do ap portation."

"Say! There's a chance! Let's get going."

But Kondor was dead to the world.

They shook him. They poured water in his face. They walked him up and down. Finally they got him sober enough to answer questions.

Robar tackled him. "Listen, pop, this is important; Can you perform apportation?"

"Huh? Me? Why, of course. How else did we build the pyramids?"

"Never mind the pyramids. Can you move these statues here tonight?"

Kondor fixed his interrogator with a bloodshot eye. "My son, the great Arcane laws are the same for all time and space. What was done in Egypt in the Golden Age can be done in Mu tonight."

Dolph put in a word. "Good grief, pop, why didn't you tell us this before."

The reply was dignified and logical. "No one asked me."

KONDOR set about his task at once, but with such slowness that the boys felt they would scream just to watch him. First, he drew a large circle in the dust. "This is the house of darkness," he announced solemnly, and added the crescent of Astarte. Then he drew another large circle tangent to the first. "And this is the house of light." He added the sign of the sun god.

When he was done, he walked widdershins about the whole three times the wrong way. His feet nearly betrayed him twice, but he recovered, and continued his progress. At the end of the third lap he hopped to the center of the house of darkness and stood facing the house of light.

The first statue on the left in the front row quivered on its base, then rose into the air and shot over the horizon to the east.

The three young men burst out with a single cheer, and tears streamed down Robar's face.

Another statue rose up. It was just poised for flight when old Kondor hiccoughed. It fell, a dead weight, back to its base, and broke into two pieces. Kondor turned his head.

"I am truly sorry," he announced; "I shall be more careful with the others."

And try he did-but the liquor was regaining its hold. He wove to and fro on his feet, his aim with the images growing more and more erratic. Stone figures flew in every direction, but none travelled any great distance. One group of six flew off together and landed with a high splash in the harbor. At last, with more than three fourths of the images still untouched he sank gently to his knees, keeled over, and remained motionless.

Dolph ran up to him, and shook him. There was no response. He peeled back one of Kondor's eyelids and examined the pupil. "It's no good," he admitted. "He won't come to for hours."

Robar gazed heartbrokenly at the shambles around him. There they are, he thought, worthless! Nobody will ever see them-just so much left over campaign material, wasted ! My biggest idea!

Clevum broke the uncomfortable silence. "Some times," he said, "I think what this country needs is a good earthquake."

". . . *the worship of their major deity.*

Beyond doubt, while errors are sometimes made in archeology, this is one case in which no chance of error exists. The statues are clearly religious in significance. With that sure footing on which to rest the careful scientist may deduce with assurance the purpose of . . ."